Mark 4:30-32 Sermon
The Church Plant

Rev. Dr. Jonathan Romig
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I don't think any of us really understood what we were getting into when we signed up to church plant back in 2015. I'd studied church planting at seminary but I didn't really know what it was. At the time I tried to explain it by coming up with this definition of a "church plant," and I even made a poster, which I displayed at Immanuel Church, our parent church, and here at Cornerstone:

> A **church plant** is a new church start that seeks to bring the good news of Jesus Christ into a local community. "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" Romans 10:15b

That's what a church plant does, right? We bring the good news of Jesus into the place where God has called us, and you're still doing that today. Notice the plant imagery on the sign. I was trying really hard to vibe "church… plant!" That's why I painted my office a lovely shade of nursery green. I hung a picture of plants (from Ikea) on my wall. I got a church plant, a literal plant. I scheduled emails to Mackenna a year after I left from the point of view of the plant, "Water me, I'm thirsty." I wanted us to grow, and I felt like the color green communicated that. It was all part of my "church growth strategy."

We were a church plant. But here's the point I want to make.

You're always a plant.

Ten years later, and I can't get away from plant imagery. And I don't think we're supposed to. Why? Because Jesus compares his kingdom, his work in this world through his people, the church, to a plant.

> **Mark 4:30-32** Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade." (NIV)

Jesus wants kingdom people to think of themselves as plant people. In fact, in Mark 4 Jesus uses **three plant illustrations** that teach us about the nature of his kingdom and what he's doing in the world. Here's the first leading up to our text:

1. The good soil (vv. 1-20)

At the start of chapter four, Jesus is sitting in a boat on the Sea of Galilee teaching in parables. And he is telling the parable of the farmer sowing seed. Some seed falls on rocky soil, and it dries up. Other seed falls among weeds and can't grow. But some seed falls on good soil, and produces a crop thirty, sixty, or a hundred-fold. Jesus is in a fertile region near Capernaum (Kfar Nahum). You can see how green it is at Capernaum today. People depend on farming to live. They would have resonated with Jesus' illustration and I bet they would have loved my church plant sign.

Westford is located in the Nashoba Fruit Belt, which used to stretch all the way from Westford to Worcester. It produced 2/3rds of Massachusetts's apples.[i] That's why we celebrate the Apple Blossom parade. Westford loves apples! Most of the farms and orchards have closed over time. They just didn't make it. But Hill Orchard and Drew Farms in Westford remain. I used to drive by Drew Farms multiple times a week on my drive from Chelmsford to Westford. Drew Farms is over 100 years old. It's still bearing fruit today. Do you think Cornerstone might still bear fruit in 100 years? God can do it. Wouldn't that be incredible? You're 10% of the way there! Keep going! Keep growing.

Jesus' word is the seed, and he's inviting you to receive it and grow. Some will hear God's word, and even respond for a season, but fall away. We saw it here over the years. Not every soil is fertile, yet. And maybe that's been you. Maybe you've been hard soil for Jesus. Today can be the beginning of a new season. Invite Jesus to do a new work in your life.

Maybe you've been around, but you feel like you're not growing. Jesus, today, is inviting you to trust in his growth. Your growth might not be perceptible to most. Unless you take a long timelapse video of a plant or seedling, you can't see it moving. You know it grows, because it grows, but you can't always see the growth. If you sit there and watch an apple seedling, you won't see anything change. It just doesn't look like it's growing, but it is. Cornerstone is 10-years old, and the growth has sometimes felt imperceptible, but over time, you're growing. I can see it today, new faces I never knew, new depth of faith I don't get to see but know is there. You're not a seedling anymore. You're a budding apple tree. *You're always a plant*.

Jesus is inviting you to meditate on his kingdom as a plant. Jesus' **second plant illustration:**

2. Unexplained growth (vv. 26-29)

I find the next couple of verses really encouraging because I identify with what I would call… "the inept farmer." This guy just sows seed. Throws it on the ground. Doesn't even look where he throws it. And somehow whether he waters it or not, whether he tends it or not, it grows.

> **Mark 4:26-29** He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come." (NIV)

When I was serving here, and a new family started coming, or someone began to walk more deeply with Jesus, I often didn't know how it happened. It wasn't because I preached a good sermon, or because we had the best worship music. We did have some pretty cool mugs at one point. But we didn't grow because of those. We grow because of Jesus. It was all because of Jesus. *You're always a plant.*

Jesus uses clumsy farmers who don't know what they're doing to produce unexplained harvest. Why? Because that's grace. It gives God's grace the opportunity to shine. So we know, it's not really us. Our *best church growth strategies*—painting my office green, hanging pictures of plants—won't get us that far. Despite our efforts, Jesus always grows his kingdom. Unexplained growth is a reminder of God's grace, and that he's the one doing the sowing and watering. *You're always a plant.*

3. The mustard seed (vv. 30-32)

And then we return to our passage. And now that you're thinking about plants, and gardening, and growth—do you hear it any differently as I read it again?

> **Mark 4:30-32** Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when

> planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade." (NIV)

Jesus tells us about the mustard seed, and how a teeny tiny seed grows into largest of all garden plants. So big birds can nest in its branches. Mustard seeds are tiny, but they grow into big plants. We've never grown a mustard plant, but we did grow a sunflower in our back yard this summer and a squirrel kept eating the sunflowers. There's something about a big plant, whether it's a sunflower or tree, that attracts life and leads to growth. When I was pastoring here, I loved walking on the trail by the church, and up to the Westford common because of the trees.

Jesus' audience would have been somewhat surprised by the mustard seed image. They thought of themselves more as a tall cedar tree, a tall oak or pine like those in Westford. Jesus' story of birds nesting in branches isn't original to him. He's retelling a **passage in Ezekiel**.

The prophet Ezekiel uses the illustration of birds and a tall cedar to show God's view to the Israelites in their Babylonian captivity. We're going back in time about 700 years before the birth of Jesus. Due to their own sin and rebellion, God sends his people into exile. While there, Ezekiel explains what's been happening:

> **Ezekiel 17:3-4** Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: A great eagle with powerful wings, long feathers and full plumage of varied colors came to Lebanon. Taking hold of the top of a cedar, he broke off its topmost shoot and carried it away to a land of merchants, where he planted it in a city of traders. (NIV)

Ezekiel is prophesying that the king of Babylon, a great eagle, had to come to Jerusalem to take away the top shoot of its cedar tree of Lebanon, which is a metaphor for Jerusalem's rulers. Babylon had come and taken away Israel's king and people and carried them to a foreign land. And there, God has planted them.

> **Ezekiel 17:10** It has been planted, but will it thrive? Will it not wither completely when the east wind strikes it—wither away in the plot where it grew?'" (NIV)

What will happen to Israel's king? What will happen to Israel's people? Will they flourish and grow in a foreign land, living as exiles? Or will they wither and fade away? God calls his people today, the church, you, a people living in exile (1 Peter 1:1; 2:11). That's right, you're exiles living in Babylon. Like Israel lived in a foreign land, we're living in a foreign country, awaiting our eternal home (Hebrews 11:16).

And there were times during these past ten years when I wondered if we would make it. Leaving Immanuel. Losing families. Covid. Droughts will come again. And when they do, where do you turn? Where do you hope? This is what Ezekiel said that I think Jesus is giving us a callback to in the **mustard seed**:

> **Ezekiel 17:22-24** "'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches… I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. (NIV)

God is promising that there's going to be another shoot, a shoot "from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit" (Isaiah 11:1). God is going to take another king, and plant him, and he will grow into a splendid cedar, and the birds will come and rest in its branches. And this planting will produce flourishing, turning dry shrubs green. And birds, Gentiles, people from other nations, will come and rest on its branches. A place of withering death will become a place of life and vitality. This is a resurrection story.

When Jesus retells this story as a story about a mustard seed, he's telling us that something that seems small and insignificant, God's kingdom, will grow into something beautiful. And as a small church, you can take a lot of hope in that. But as I reflect on this passage, I think if Jesus is the shoot.

Jesus is the core of the mustard seed. Jesus is the fullness of God's kingdom. The seed of God's kingdom is in their midst, and it's Jesus. But what happened to the shoot? It had to be broken off first. Jesus is the branch who was broken off. Jesus is the seed who was buried. Jesus withered and died so that you and I and a great kingdom could sprout up. Jesus perished so that we can have eternal life. Jesus is the vine. We are the branches (John 15:1-5).

Here's what I want you to remember. And when you and I are with Jesus one day, and the next generation is here, here's what I want them to remember.

You're always a plant. Remember the tree.

We are the small and insignificant mustard seed that is growing into an eternal kingdom. You're doing this because Jesus came as a small and insignificant babe, a human seed, grew as a man, suffered, died (planted), rose again, and is now seated next to the Father growing his kingdom.

The only way you and I can be a part of God's kingdom, is by being a part of Christ. We die spiritually with Christ so that we might live with him too. He is the vine. We are the branches. Drought will come. And so will the harvest. *You're always a plant. Remember the tree.*

Remember that the kingdom is a tree a tall shrub where birds can come and rest. You get to be a place where your neighbors come and rest because you're a Jesus place. Jesus is the branch, who willingly allowed himself to be cut off, so that you and I can be welcomed in.

You're always a plant. Remember the tree.

Jonathan Romig preached this sermon at Cornerstone Congregational Church's 10-year anniversary celebration on October 19th, 2025. I'm grateful for you, Cornerstone. Congratulations!

Discussion Questions

1. What's one thing you're thankful for from Cornerstone's history the last 10 years?
2. How does the image of God's kingdom as a mustard seed and tall cedar encourage you?
3. How does Jesus' sacrifice on the tree strengthen your faith?

Watch the sermon recording on YouTube or read the manuscript on Substack.

[i] *Westford: A Sense of Community.* 49.